

SAFEGUARD YOUR MINISTRY FROM MORAL FAILURE

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FAMILY RESEARCH COUNCIL
Washington, D.C.

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*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my anxieties;
And see if there is any wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting.*
(Psalm 139:23-24)

Ever since the fall in Eden (Genesis 3), sexual sin has been part of the human experience. But it is particularly tragic when clergy and ministry leaders fall into this kind of sin. It is crucial for Christian leaders to search their hearts to better understand the combinations of stress, misdirected needs, and unresolved grieving that can open the doorway for giving in to this temptation.

None of us who care for Christian leaders want to see them fall, which is one of the reasons that I wrote a recent article on helping pastors prevent

burnout (FRC.org/pastorburnout).¹ That article is full of grace and encouragement about ways that clergy can be renewed and strengthened.

But Scripture also contains strong warnings for Christian leaders who cause those young in the faith to stumble. Jesus himself said, “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to



have a heavy millstone hung around his neck” (Matthew 18:6). In other words, Christian leaders have a responsibility to steward their authority in God-honoring ways.

In this article, I will address this issue by weaving together a deeper understanding of **(1)** the contributing factors to moral failure, **(2)** a practical understanding of our sexual nature, and **(3)** a clarion call for all of us who are in Christian ministry to increase our dependence on Christ. I will be sharing principles drawn from the integration of Scripture with an understanding of what I will call God’s “attachment design” for human relationships. This will provide guidance on ways that leaders can “watch and pray” in

order to resist temptation (Matthew 26:41). These principles will also instruct leaders in ways to meet their emotional, relational, and even sexual needs in healthy ways so that there will be less of a foothold for temptation.

This approach is drawn from sexual ethics workshops which I have provided for a major church denomination and from trainings that I have shared for the American Association of Christian Counselors in their outreach to both clergy and counselors. In sharing this important material, I want to follow in the steps of Christ who came ministering with both grace and truth (John 1:14). Our framework will be anchored in the truth. In grace I will focus on healthy principles of soul care with less concentration on “what not to do.”

A MAP FOR HEALTHY EMOTIONAL AND RELATIONAL MATURITY

As adults, our capacity to function sexually typically comes to us through little or no effort on our part. When we hit puberty, God gifts us with hormones and physical maturation so that we are

now capable of fulfilling His plan that we would “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28). Yielded believers who are growing in Christlikeness will be instructed and aware of the biblical guidelines for stewarding the gifts of sexual maturity. We also must realize that each person’s capacity to handle these gifts is closely related to their emotional and relational maturity. Growth in these areas of maturity takes a great deal of individual effort and spiritual discipline on our part.



There are some important aspects of emotional and relational maturity that grow best through our relationship connections with one another. God literally ordained relationships with family members and other believers to be the incarnational expressions of His love towards us and for us to show His love to them.

It is through giving love selflessly and receiving love in our moments of need that we grow in our emotional and relational maturity. There is a helpful map which describes for us how we tangibly know and experience love. It helps us determine the foundation for starting on this

journey of maturity and also can help highlight our growth areas. This map is God's attachment design for human relationships.

GOD'S ATTACHMENT DESIGN

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone." (Genesis 2:18a)

Our first glimpse at human attachment needs is found in Genesis 2. Recall that Adam had unbroken fellowship with God, peaceable relationships with all the animals, and open access to the lush beauty of the Garden of Eden. Yet Adam needed more than divine fellowship to flourish. Therefore, God provided for Adam's needs to "not be alone" by creating Eve and instituting the ordinance of marriage. This is the first example of attachment recorded in Scripture:

"For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." (Genesis 2:24, 25)

Human needs for oneness and closeness precede the fall. In other words, the need for healthy

relationships are not part of the sin nature. Each human born after the fall still has innate needs for closeness and connection, coupled now with a strong need to survive on this planet where death is part of our existence. Attachment is God's provision for the ways that humans can connect with one another and parents can protect their children.

The attachment bonding process begins with our first cry as we enter this world. We are so needy and helpless. God ordained



that our parents would respond to those first cries, and each cry thereafter, with comfort and strength to let us know that we are not alone and to soothe our immature nervous systems.²

When our parents hold us, soothe us, and attend to us, we gain a sense of settled confidence. We have a reassurance that someone is watching over us, we matter, and there is provision for our needs.

These early experiences with our parents directly impact our ability to accurately perceive God as our providing and protecting Heavenly Father: "And

my God will meet all your needs according to his riches in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:19); “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you” (Psalm 56:3).

Children who have the consistent touch, face to face attention, and accurate emotional responsiveness from a loving parent will develop “secure attachment.”^{3 4} Securely attached children don’t fear abandonment; they are vulnerable and direct in asking for their needs to be met. Because they know that there is always a home base for them with their parent, they are brave and branch out and explore the world. They also know how to explore their inner world of emotions and share these with those they trust, due to their previous experiences of receiving compassionate emotional responses from their parent. In short, children who have these security building experiences have the strongest possible foundation laid for emotional and relational maturity. Here are some attributes they will display.



1. Their nervous systems are more stable and more regulated when stressors arise.^{5 6}

2. They turn to trusted others for physical and emotional support, without a lot of dramatic displays or avoidance of important concerns.
3. They are brave to branch out and explore the exterior world and their inner world of emotions.
4. Because they have received empathy, they are capable of giving empathy to others.⁷
5. As they grow in age, they can lean on others and others lean on them.

INTERDEPENDENCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The basis for our Christian faith is dependence on God. Our salvation begins at the moment when we receive Christ in childlike humility by saying “I need you. I repent and receive the gift of your atoning sacrifice. I need you every day to be my Savior and Lord.” Our posture of faith is evident when we receive His grace and trust in Christ to save us (Ephesians 2:8). This vulnerable posture is similar to the trust that securely attached children have with their parents. This aligns with what Jesus said when He told us, “unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of Heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

Our relationship with God is one of dependence, modeled on the Father-Son relationship depicted in Scripture (John 5:19). And our dependence on Christ, our attachment to Christ, makes us assured and strong.

In our relationship with other believers, we want to embody the relationship experience of interdependence. We are all members of one body, under the headship of Christ (I Corinthians 12:12-27; Colossians 1:18). In the embodiment of interdependence, we need *one another* to function and fulfill the kingdom purposes of God. There are many crucial “one another” passages in Scripture:



“Love one another, as I have loved you.” (John 13:34)

“Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another.” (James 5:16)

“Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another.” (Eph. 4:32)

“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Gal. 6:2)

In God's attachment design, we note that securely attached adults display interdependence. They depend on others, and allow others to depend upon them. They have a group of people whom they trust and rely upon, and they are sought after as those who are safe to be relied upon. In the body of Christ our leaders must embrace interdependence and be connected to "one another."



Interdependence sets the stage of accountability for leaders. We can only be helped, to the extent that we open ourselves and share our burdens with trusted confidants. We can only benefit from support when we are honest with our sin struggles and our needs. However, we do have a choice whether to be open and vulnerable to trusted accountability partners, which makes us stronger. Or we can isolate ourselves and miss out on the chance for growth.

My hope and prayer for all Christian leaders is that they will not be solely dependent on self, which is isolating and a formula for many types of error.

My prayer is that they would be dependent daily on Christ and that they would find interdependent relationships with other mature members of the body of Christ.

HEALTHY SOURCES OF ACCOUNTABILITY FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERS

Pastors may find it difficult to ask for help with their struggles and needs. Because parishioners often idealize pastors, expecting them to be constantly strong, it can be a challenge to locate a trusted person who has the maturity to bear the burdens of a pastor. In addition, pastors have professional boundaries that discourage them from leaning on their parishioners with their needs. We can quickly see how these realities limit pastors in terms of support and accountability within the home church.



But pastors, like all believers, need “body ministry.” They are a part of the body, an interdependent

part like all the other members. Pastors are not the head; only Christ is head of the body (Colossians 1:18). Thus, pastors and Christian leaders must have interdependent relationships. In my relationships with pastors over the past two decades, I have seen creative approaches to bring these elements together. For example:

1. Some pastors confide in one or two senior members of their leadership team.
2. Many pastors participate in peer groups with other pastors.
3. Pastors may seek out a mentor within their denomination or from other trusted sources.
4. Some pastors cultivate friendship with a mature believer outside of their congregation.
5. Married pastors should grow their relationship with their spouses for both emotional and spiritual support and for the care of their sexual needs.
6. Many pastors seek out a spiritual director to help with their growth and spiritual formation.
7. In certain seasons, it is wise for pastors to seek counsel with a Christian psychologist or counselor.

THE UNIQUE NATURE OF SEXUAL NEEDS

Moral failure does not exclusively entail sexual sin, but sexual sin is one of the most devastating types of moral failure that Christian leaders can engage in. It is worthwhile to delve into a deeper understanding of our sexual needs so that we can learn ways to properly care for them. Through Scripture we understand that marriage is the only relationship we have been given to care for our sexual needs.

When I speak at workshops, I introduce participants to the concept of “Whole Sex” which comes from my marriage book, *Face to Face: Seven Keys to a Secure Marriage*.⁸ Essentially, this means that sex is a blend of both our biological drive to “be fruitful and multiply”(Genesis 1:28) and our attachment drive to be connected in life sustaining relationships with others. Whole Sex in marriage cares for both our attachment needs and our biological drive needs.

The attachment system is the first to grow in us as infants and children, and by the time we hit puberty things get a lot more complicated. From

puberty onward, our sex drives and attachment drives are “inextricably intertwined.”⁹ Because sex is a blend of both reproduction and attachment, we need to understand that either of those drives can activate a sexual response in us as humans.

The act of sex should encompass both attachment (with our spouse) and our biological drive to reproduce, but humans can split off parts of self and only have sex from the biological drive side. This is where the secular concept of “hooking up” comes from.

Conversely, a person who is feeling lonely, from an attachment standpoint, may be led into sexual actions when they begin



to meet their attachment needs with someone outside of marriage. Any person who meets an emotional need can start to appear attractive. Attraction can then activate a sexual response.

Anecdotally, I have heard of pastors who slid down this slippery slope of being emotionally attracted to a person of the opposite sex, only to find that it led to physical temptation.

UNDERSTANDING PHYSICAL ATTRACTION

*Then God blessed them, and God said to them,
“Be fruitful and multiply...” (Genesis 1:28)*

When God gave us the command to multiply,
He equipped us with a wondrously complex
reproductive system.

And it all begins with
attraction. Thus,
it’s important
to understand
a few aspects of
human attraction.

First, attraction
is a combination of
emotional, physical, and even subconscious
biological processes. Did you know that the
universal feature of attractiveness is symmetry?¹⁰
In other words, we are attracted to people who are
evenly proportioned on both sides of their bodies.
It sends us an underlying biological signal about
the healthiness of the person that we are looking
at. Whether we are married to them or not, we can
biologically detect a person with whom we might
have healthier offspring based on their symmetry.



Second, research also suggests that we can detect, through our sense of smell, those persons who have a complimentary immune system profile to our own.¹¹ This sends us the biological signal that mating with such “complimentary” people would be fruitful in producing children who



have the combined benefit of two complimentary immune systems, and these children would be better able to fend off illness.

Third, each of us have certain emotional or psychological patterns of attraction that come from our childhood. For example, some of us are looking for a spouse who is very attentive, while others prefer a spouse who is a little more independent. Finally, it is important to know that you can come across many people in the course of your lifetime who are attractive to you in one or all of these ways. It can happen to you when you are least expecting it!

When we pursue a person with whom we are attracted, it can lead to infatuation. Infatuation is a neurochemical process in our brain that causes

us to “hyper-attach” to another person. Infatuation is very powerful and mimics the experience of being high on drugs for days at a time.¹² We may hyper focus on that other person, be euphoric in their presence, and even feel restless when we are apart from them. Once activated, infatuation typically runs its course for several months. I have spoken with many clients who regretted opening this Pandora’s box with a person of the opposite sex when they were already married to someone else. This may be just one of several reasons for the admonishment:

“Promise me, O women of Jerusalem, not to awaken love until the time is right.” (Song of Solomon 8:4)

HIGH NEED STATES

As noted above, attraction can happen within us at random and unpredictable moments. But there are certain seasons in our lives that may leave us more susceptible to emotional attraction triggers from a parishioner or person in the community. The following is a short (and by no means comprehensive) list of such seasons:

1. Seasons of Grief and Loss – Can lead to solace and bonding for ourselves and parishioners.

2. Seasons of Stress – May lead us to look for diversion and comfort with a parishioner.
3. Seasons of Boredom – Can lead us to look for the stimulus of attraction and infatuation.
4. Seasons of Triumph – After having attained a pinnacle accomplishment, we may have a hard time settling back into normal mundane life.
5. Facing our own Aging and Mortality – May lead us to pursue the youthful feelings of attraction.
6. Seasons of Invisibility – Can lead us to crave the experience of being seen and appreciated.
7. Seasons of Loneliness – May lead us to seek out companionship of the opposite sex.

During these seasons of life we must possess wisdom to stop and reflect on our needs. By faith we know that God has provided for all our needs in Christ (Philippians 4:19). These are vital times to be connected within interdependent relationships of accountability with people who can be the hands and feet of Christ to minister to and challenge us. We especially need the comfort and discernment of the Holy Spirit during these seasons.

WISE COUNSEL FROM FAITHFUL PASTORS

There is provision for our needs in all the seasons of our lives. Even when we are in high need states and facing temptation, there is always a way out. In fact, God's Word promises that "No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it" (I Corinthians 10:13). In my own life, I have been blessed to share friendship with several pastors who have supported me through all the types of seasons listed above, and I have supported them in return. I interviewed five of them who have been morally faithful over the cumulative span of more than 150 years of ministry. Here are some of the pieces of wisdom that they shared.¹³



BOUNDARIES

All the pastors I interviewed spoke about various ways that they establish and monitor their boundaries with parishioners. Boundaries are the guardrails that you set up to govern the degree of contact or closeness you have with parishioners. These boundaries are essential to set up ahead of time, because the fleshly part of us can quickly rationalize or justify unhealthy actions for convenience sake in the moment. For example, a pastor might say, "I have been so sacrificial this week, I deserve a little satisfaction."

Several of these pastors spoke about their boundary to never meet alone with a person of the opposite sex, nor a child, unless their office door was open and there was another staff member in the vicinity of their office. These pastors all agreed that they would not go out for a meal alone with a person of the opposite sex as it is too intimate.

Regarding intimacies, pastors spoke about their specific awareness of the power of touch and hugs and ways to be very sensitive to this. Even during prayer times, they encouraged other pastors to focus on the centrality of Christ's provision instead of in-depth emotional sharing with their parishioners.

SELF-AWARENESS

These pastors spoke about the importance of being self-aware under the conviction of the Holy Spirit. Consider what your social, emotional, and sexual needs are. Be mindful of the activities and seasons of your life which heighten these need states. Pay special attention to any ways that you are seeking out a parishioner to meet these needs.

Pastors shared that they all set their boundaries prior to interactions with church members, and they were very mindful of any inclination on their own part or that of another to push even slightly past the boundaries. This signaled a “red flag” to them.

COVENANT AND LEGACY

The pastors I spoke with were keenly aware of two covenants in their lives which transcend mere human boundaries. They spoke of their covenant to God as ministers of the gospel of Christ. This high calling guided, convicted, and challenged them to not do anything that would violate their calling and relationship with Christ. In the bigger picture, any action can be balanced against the question of, “How do I see this action fitting with my calling?”

Do I want my legacy to be based on this action that I am about to take?”

In my interviews with pastors, most of them were married for the bulk of their ministry years. Therefore, each pastor routinely reflected upon



whether their actions were faithful to their marriage covenant, and it was helpful to consider how their spouses would be impacted by their actions. This dual covenant commitment struck me as beneficial.

Whenever one area of personal commitment was struggling, the other still stood as a strong standard.

RELYING ON YOUR OWN MARRIAGE

Not every clergy person is married. As noted above, the pastors I interviewed were married for most of their ministry years. Like all married people must do, they invested in their marriages in the good as well as the challenging times. They also relied on their spouses for support, including

emotional and sexual intimacy. There were some other interesting ways that pastors relied on their spouses, such as listening to their gut instincts about whether a parishioner was pure in motive or not. They sometimes invited their spouses to be present for meetings with parishioners of the opposite sex. Pastors proudly displayed photos of their spouses in the office to send a clear signal of devotion to them.

RISK MANAGEMENT

Most pastors not only focused on ministry, but they also had a sense of managing risks to their ministry or reputation. These pastors did not want to do anything that might even have a hint of impropriety. They asked the question, “What could go wrong?” especially when ministering in crisis situations. The thought was, “a hurting parishioner might go to a bad place, and they might try to take me with them.” Moreover, they were ever mindful of how to guard the heart of the person they were ministering to.



Finally, these clergy made use of other staff members in times of crisis, consulted with them in difficult situations, and provided ongoing accountability within the pastoral staff. A certain amount of humility was evident among these clergy as they sought to walk humbly before God with the awareness that no one is immune to temptation or above the level where any kind of accusation could be levied.

CELIBACY IN MINISTRY

There are seasons in the lives of most clergy where they are not going to be sexually active. For some clergy this will run the entire course of their ministry, while others have more temporary seasons. In seasons of celibacy, it is vital for clergy to guard their own hearts. These can be high-risk times for acting out sexually.

During these seasons, there are no easy answers. But it is a crucial window for clergy to engage in emotional, spiritual, and even physical forms of self-care. Here is a partial list of ways to engage soul care in order to stay faithful and even flourish during such seasons.

1. Focus on gratitude for the things that you still have.
2. Delve more deeply into the life of worship and surrender as a believer.
3. Cultivate your love relationship with Christ.
4. Intentionally grieve for the loss of the experience of participating in sexual connection so that you might reach places of acceptance vs. anger, bargaining, or striving.
5. Engage in physical exercise, especially cardiovascular which leaves us pleasantly tired and provides a valuable sense of discharge from pent up energies and frustrations. This is contrasted with heavy weight training which boosts testosterone.
6. Seek appropriate forms of touch from platonic relationships. We all need hugs.

Managing our emotional, relational, and sexual needs can seem like a difficult task, especially when we are caring for the needs of parishioners and our own families. Yet it is crucial for Christian leaders to be purposeful in pursuing healthy care of their needs. It is vital to set up accountability relationships and supports, for none of us can do

this on our own. Finally, we cannot do it in our own strength. As Christians we take comfort in the knowledge that it is,

*“Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,
says the Lord of hosts.” (Zechariah 4:6)*

You can learn more about embracing God’s Attachment design for marriage and your faith walk by reading, *Face to Face: Seven Keys to a Secure Marriage* (facetofacemarriage.com).

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